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SUBJECT: THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE IN THE JUST RUSSIA PARTY

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Four Duma deputies from the left-leaning, Kremlin-sponsored Just Russia party offered us assessments of their party in Russia's fifth Duma, which convened in January after the December 2 parliamentary elections. As expected, Just Russia has found it difficult to have an impact on legislation in a Duma dominated by the ruling party, and these deputies' ambivalence about their Kremlin-friendly party was readily apparent. For these four deputies, Just Russia has not turned out to be the vehicle for effective policy they had hoped it would be, given Mironov's weak leadership and the ruling party's setting of the agenda and terms of debate; nevertheless, they took some credit for behind the scenes influence and lobbying. Just Russia continued to experience difficulties in the regions, where the quality of its leaders varied significantly and local United Russia leaders did not welcome the competition. End summary.

An Unholy Alliance

¶2. (C) Current Just Russia Duma members Ivan Grachev and Oksana Dmitriyeva migrated from Yabloko via the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs to Just Russia in advance of the December 2007 Duma elections. Grachev and Dmitriyeva, who are husband and wife, had been the only tandem deputies in the third Duma, but Grachev was not elected to the fourth Duma, where Dmitriyeva represented St. Petersburg's Nevskiy district from 2004 - 2008.

¶3. (C) With the increase in the threshold for representation in the Duma from five to seven percent and the change to a Duma membership wholly elected from party lists, Dmitriyeva, who had been a single-mandate Deputy in the fourth Duma, understood that Grachev and she would have to affiliate with a Kremlin-approved party if they were to remain active in national politics. Dmitriyeva's good relationship with Just Russia Chairman Sergey Mironov, himself a native of St. Petersburg, and the name recognition she brought to the new party as a prominent St. Petersburg politician combined to seal the deal. Both Dmitriyeva and Grachev joined Just Russia after it was created in October 2006. In December 2, 2007, Duma elections Dmitriyeva and Grachev both won one of the 38 mandates Just Russia secured in the fifth Duma. In the 450-seat Duma dominated by United Russia with 315 seats, Just Russia came in a distant fourth following both the Communist Party and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR).

¶4. (C) Dmitriyeva was well aware that joining Just Russia, which enthusiastically backed Putin successor Dmitry Medvedev's bid for the presidency, entailed compromise. In conversations with us throughout the campaign, she attempted to justify her choice: western-leaning liberals had been marginalized, and she was not a street politician, Dmitriyeva said. She thought that her close relationship to Mironov

would make her influential in Just Russia, especially on economic issues, where the party had relatively little expertise. Mironov's influence with the Kremlin would translate into for his party that she and other like-minded converts to the party could use to advance their own agendas.

¶5. (C) Dmitriyeva understood that Mironov was loyal to Putin, but she thought that Just Russia would need to distinguish itself from United Russia, and that it could safely do so on economic issues. Without discarding their favorite projects, Dmitriyeva and Grachev chose the "art of the possible." She has continued her focus on social-economic development, while Grachev has continued to push legislation concerned with small business development and the slowly emerging mortgage industry in Russia.

Dissatisfied, So Far

¶6. (C) In a mid-March conversation, a subdued Dmitriyeva and Grachev told us that they were "not happy with a single piece of legislation that had been passed" since the new Duma convened in January, and their ability to shape the law was more limited than they had expected when elected. The Presidential Administration, via United Russia, firmly controlled the operations of the Duma, and Dmitriyeva expressed dissatisfaction with the level of debate. As one example of the difficulty Just Russia has had in influencing the legislative process, Dmitriyeva noted that an alternative budget the party proposed had not even been discussed before it was defeated. She also alleged that United Russia constantly used its constitutional majority to limit other parties' ability to offer amendments.

¶7. (C) United Russia, according to Dmitriyeva, used its Kremlin connections not just to shepherd legislation through the Duma, but to engage in petty harassment of other Duma deputies. Although the Duma had been in session for two months, a number of the Just Russia deputies had yet to be assigned office space. She described the current crop of United Russia deputies as "more passive" and "more faceless" than their predecessors. Most of the United Russia deputies treated the legislature as a "gentleman's club." They rarely took the floor in debate on bills and, indeed, they often were not present during the sessions. While Grachev agreed that the United Russia contingent was weaker than its predecessor, he cautiously endorsed the all-party list elections as essential to constructing -- "eventually" -- a "real party system."

¶8. (C) In a separate meeting, an even more pessimistic Duma Deputy Gennadiy Gudkov dismissed suggestions that his Just Russia party could be a counterweight to United Russia. (Gudkov had earlier been elected to the fourth Duma from a single-mandate district as leader of the People's Party. Once elected, he joined the United Russia faction, and then moved to Just Russia when the People's Party merged with it in April 2007.) With the December 2 elections, Gudkov said, the "return to a one-party system" had been accomplished. That outcome was natural in the "ideological vacuum" that had emerged following the discrediting of western-leaning liberal parties and democracy itself in the '90s. Adding to Just Russia's ineffectuality, he said, was Mironov's "absolute personal loyalty" to Putin.

¶9. (C) Gudkov told us he had frequently urged Mironov to take Just Russia's role as an alternative to United Russia more seriously. He had urged that Mironov invite the more active members of his party to form a "collegial body" that would devise the party's strategy, in the face of overwhelming United Russia numerical strength, for drawing media and public attention to their differences with Kremlin-engineered policies. Mironov had not reacted to his proposal.

Liberal Democrats and
Communists Unimpressive

¶10. (C) Gudkov was no more optimistic about possibilities for the other "opposition" Duma parties -- the Communists and the Liberal Democrats. While Dmitriyeva and Grachev had described their Communist Party counterparts as "not bad," Gudkov thought the Communists were both too orthodox to be effective in today's Russia, and too willing to compromise with the Kremlin. Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats were both too loyal to Putin and too marginal a party to play a serious role in Russia's political life. Gudkov predicted that the lack of the feedback that a good legislature should provide meant that problems were accumulating unrecognized and unresolved by the government. Even dedicated legislators like Grachev and Dmitriyeva, he said, had less contact with the electorate, as the number of constituents in their districts had increased greatly with the introduction of the regional party list system.

Former Communist
More Upbeat

¶11. (C) Former Communist Party member Ilya Ponomarev in a separate conversation was more optimistic about Just Russia's prospects than his party colleagues. He labeled the Just Russia faction the "strongest in the Duma." United Russia deputies were "mere executors" of the Kremlin's will while the Communists had been in the legislature too long to be taken seriously. Ponomarev admitted, however, that Mironov was not "a strong leader," and that he had surrounded himself with "former classmates" who were personally loyal but ineffective party workers.

¶12. (C) Still, Ponomarev said, Just Russia's core members were already cooperating closely and would eventually develop a strategy for making Just Russia more of a force in Russia's political life. The most active Just Russia Duma deputies, Ponomarev said, were Dmitriyeva, Grachev, Oleg Sheyn, Galina Khovanskaya, Aleksandr Babakov, Svetlana Gorechova, Mikhail Storshinov, and Valeriy Gartung.

¶13. (C) Aleksandr Morozov, a member of the Just Russia Central Committee, agreed that United Russia has monopolized the internal mechanics of the Duma, but claimed that Just Russia was effective behind the scenes. He alleged, without concrete examples, that his party had proposed several important bills that United Russia had claimed credit for. Morozov also claimed that Just Russia has been influential on social and educational issues through its chairmanships of the Science and Technology and Families, Women and Children Committees.

Worse in the Regions

¶14. (U) United Russia's easy control of the Duma was further cemented in the eleven regions where elections were held on March 2. In addition to polling well below United Russia, Just Russia generally fared less well than the Communists and the Liberal Democratic Party. In Yaroslavl, the party was administratively excluded from the ballot. In Bashkiriya, it finished a distant third, with less than four percent of the vote, to United Russia and the Communists, while in Ingushetiya it received just two of the Duma's twenty-seven seats. In Ivanovo, Just Russia finished fourth, again behind United Russia, the Communists, and LDPR.

¶15. (C) In the regions where it was not excluded, Just Russia managed three to fourteen percent of the vote. Dmitriyeva contended that the wide dispersion was traceable to the capabilities of the local Just Russia leadership. Morozov added that the party's results in the regions depended considerably on the relationship between the local administration and local party leaders. He said that in Yaroslavl, local SR leader Anatoliy Greshnevnikov, a fiery critic of the local administration, had been removed from the ballot. In other regions, such as Amur region, Kalmykiya and Adygeya, the lack of a strong local party organization had hampered Just Russia's efforts. In Rostov region, serious

internal party conflicts had resulted in the departure of a large number of the leadership. On the other hand, Morozov noted that in Sakha, the leader of the party ranks second in popularity only to Putin and, as a result, the party won almost fifteen percent of the vote.

Comment

¶16. (C) Dmitriyeva, Grachev and Gudkov turned to Just Russia because they felt they had no other vehicle for participating in politics. United Russia's overwhelming majority in the Duma and Just Russia Chairman Mironov's inability to simultaneously demonstrate his loyalty to the Kremlin while charting a distinct course for the party have meant that the activists' hopes that they could make their presence felt from within the tent have not been realized. A system where the Presidential Administration drafts most legislation and the ability of the Duma to pursue an independent legislative agenda is correspondingly reduced, means that their hopes were probably misplaced. The prospects of any legislator making a significant impact under the current arrangement are low.

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